

How the Community Cricket Program helped Sajia build her cricket skills while overcoming gender barriers



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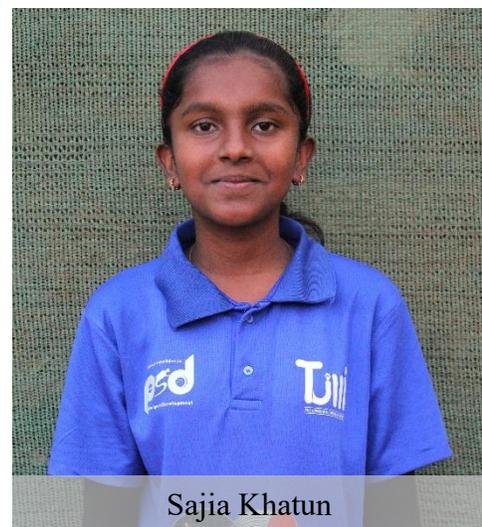
In many underserved communities across India, girls often have limited opportunities to participate in sport due to prevailing gender stereotypes. Societal norms frequently discourage them from engaging in physical activities perceived as masculine, reinforcing the notion that sport is better suited for boys ([Raj et al., 2024](#)). Consequently, girls are often directed towards traditionally ‘feminine’ activities such as dance, or those which are less physically taxing such as indoor games. However, there is now a growing realization that girls are just as capable as boys and need to be provided with equal opportunities to take interest and develop their skills in sports.

To address this gap, [Pro Sport Development](#) (PSD) and [The Upamanyu Mallik Initiatives](#) (TUMI) have been implementing the [Community Cricket Program](#) (CCP) for young people aged 12 to 18 years from marginalized communities in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. While the program aims to enhance the physical and socio-emotional well-being of young people through sessions on life skills and child rights, it also provides structured opportunities for both boys and girls to play cricket which provides an inclusive environment that is conducive for them to question gender-based stereotypes. By challenging traditional gender norms, CCP provides a platform for girls to gain confidence as they develop their sporting abilities, overcoming gender-based discrimination, and pave the way for greater equality.

Sajia Khatun, a student of class 8 of Vivekanand Siksha Kendra, in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, has been an active participant in the CCP since December 2023. The program has provided her with structured exposure to cricket which has further helped hone her interest and skills in the same.

Building an active lifestyle

The CCP played a pivotal role in transforming Sajia’s attitude towards physical activity and overall well-being. Before joining the program, Sajia had little interest in sport and limited cricket knowledge. However, through regular participation in CCP sessions, she not only developed a keen interest in cricket but also became enthusiastic about other sports such as table tennis. Her mother shared:



“Earlier, she did not know anything about cricket, not even catching. But now, not only has she developed an interest for cricket, she has also become interested in other sports such as table tennis. She watches sports videos on YouTube and eagerly tries to find out more about sports.”

Sajia’s mother has also observed significant changes in her daughter's personality, especially in her engagement with peers. Previously reserved and hesitant in her interactions, Sajia has now become more social. She has become more active in communicating with others, and enjoys playing together with them.

Moreover, the program has also had a noticeable impact on Sajia’s physical fitness and mental health as reported by her. She has embraced an active lifestyle and recognizes the importance of staying fit. She shared:

“This program has also changed my view towards sports and staying active in general.”

Fostering sporting skills through exposure to cricket

Before joining the CCP, Sajia had only watched cricket on television without fully understanding its rules or gameplay. Through hands-on experience, she learned essential game concepts, which deepened her appreciation for and interest in the sport. She shared:

“I did not know much about cricket earlier and did not know how to bowl or bat properly. I used to watch it on TV but I did not know how it was played, and I did not understand it very well. Once we started playing it, then I understood what a run is, what is a dot ball and what is a no ball.”

Sajia credits the CCP with helping hone her cricket-related competencies as she has been able to develop skills in batting, bowling, and fielding. Initially, she struggled to bowl properly but through consistent training and practice, she gradually improved her skills, gaining confidence in her abilities. She shared:

“Earlier, I could not bowl well. I was unable to understand it and unable to execute the skills needed for it. Slowly, I improved my skills and developed a better understanding of batting, bowling, keeping, etc.”

She noted that her bowling skills improved the most, as she learned how to throw the ball with better control and accuracy. Additionally, her understanding of batting evolved as she learned how to grip the bat correctly, focus on the ball’s speed, and time her shots effectively. The program

also introduced her to wicket-keeping, teaching her the right positioning and techniques required for the role. She is excited to continue on her learning curve:

“I feel that I’m the best at bowling since that is an area I have also improved the most in. I want to keep improving and also work on my batting and fielding.”

Overcoming gender stereotypes

The CCP has played a vital role in empowering Sajia to set an example and motivate other girls to participate in cricket—a sport traditionally dominated by boys. As her mother noted, before Sajia joined the program, cricket was not a common choice for girls in her neighborhood where most girls preferred sports such as badminton or basketball, or engaged in indoor games. However, Sajia’s active participation in cricket inspired many other girls to take up the sport, fostering a positive shift in the community. Her mother expressed:

“Ever since Sajia started playing, a lot of girls have now started playing cricket together. I feel very happy to see that more girls in the community are now taking an interest in playing sports ever since my daughter started with this program.”

Sajia’s mother also observed a significant change in how boys and girls interact through sport and their mindset towards playing together. She highlighted:

“Previously, girls in our community refrained from playing alongside boys. However, after participating in the program, Sajia now actively encourages both boys and girls to play together.”

Additionally, the program has also helped Sajia become more aware of gender stereotypes, where she has observed that while boys playing in shorts is widely accepted, girls often face criticism for the same. Through discussions and exposure to a more inclusive and equitable space as a result of the program, she has come to recognize the unfairness of such norms.

“The program has helped me realize that treating boys and girls differently is wrong. It has made me more aware and helped me understand that people should view boys and girls equally, there is nothing a boy can do that a girl cannot.”



Sajia playing cricket

Sajia's journey highlights the transformative role played by inclusive sporting spaces in not just supporting individual growth but also challenging deep-rooted societal norms. CCP has not only nurtured and honed her cricket-related competencies but has also provided her with a platform to set an example for other girls in her community, inspiring them to take up cricket. By equipping young girls like Sajia with the opportunity to engage in sports, the program fosters a sense of empowerment and self-belief, proving that gender should never be a barrier to participation.

The [Community Cricket Program](#) (CCP) is a structured, mixed-gendered intervention delivered by [Pro Sport Development](#) (PSD) and [The Upamanyu Mallik Initiatives](#) (TUMI) that engages young people between the ages of 12 to 18 years from underserved communities across Bhubaneswar. By leveraging the power of cricket to improve young people's health and wellbeing, the CCP aims to equip them with crucial soft skills and sporting values, as well as increasing their awareness on issues of child rights.